University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension

Extension

1-1-1988

G88-866 Christmas Tree Selection and Care

Mike Kuhns
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Rollin Schnieder
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/extensionhist

Part of the Agriculture Commons, and the Curriculum and Instruction Commons

Kuhns, Mike and Schnieder, Rollin, "G88-866 Christmas Tree Selection and Care" (1988). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.* Paper 863.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/extensionhist/863

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Extension at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

G88-866-A

NebGuide

Published by Cooperative Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Christmas Tree Selection and Care

This guide discusses types of trees, tree species, cut tree care, offers tips on decorating trees, considers tree disposal and laws governing the display of Christmas trees, and suggests a proper type of tree stand.

Mike Kuhns, State Extension Forester
Rollin Schnieder, Extension Safety Specialist

- Introduction
- Christmas Tree Selection
- Species
- Cut Tree Care
- Decorating the Tree
- Tree Disposal
- Legislation
- Build A Christmas Tree Stand

Introduction

Christmas trees have been a tradition in the United States since the Revolutionary War, when homesick Hessian soldiers decorated fir trees as was their custom in Germany. Since then the custom has spread. It is now difficult for many people to imagine Christmas without the Christmas tree tradition.

To insure a safe and happy holiday, you need to know a few things about selecting and caring for Christmas trees.

Christmas Tree Selection

Size is the first thing to consider when getting a Christmas tree. Measure the spot for the tree including width and ceiling height. Remember that several inches will eventually be cut off of the butt end. The stand, on the other hand, may add several inches to the tree's overall height.

Several types of Christmas trees are available, including cut trees, potted or balled trees, and artificial trees.

Cut Trees

Cut, live trees are the most common type of Christmas tree. Three options are available to a person wanting a cut Christmas tree ---a pre-cut tree purchased from a dealer, a choose-and-cut tree purchased from a local grower, or a wild-grown native Christmas tree.

Great care needs to be taken in selecting a *pre-cut tree*. Most pre-cut Christmas trees sold in Nebraska are grown in the Lake States and the Pacific Northwest. This is not necessarily a disadvantage except these trees may be cut as early as August to get to the retailer by Thanksgiving. As soon as a Christmas tree is cut it begins to dry. A tree that has dried will not recover when placed in water and is a fire hazard. Dry trees also tend to lose needles.

Follow these steps to be sure that the tree you are buying is fresh and of high quality.

1. Gently pull on the needles. They should be tightly attached to the twig.

2. Shake the tree vigorously or bounce the butt on the ground. If green needles fall, look further. Dead, brown needles falling from the inner part of the tree may have been shed years ago and are less of a problem.

3. Check to see that the tree has a fresh, green color. Some trees are sprayed with a blue-green dye. This dye is harmless, but be sure it's not hiding a dry tree.

4. Buy early before all the desirable trees have been sold.

5. Fir and pine trees hold needles better than spruce trees.

6. Break a few needles. They should be flexible and will feel moist or possibly sticky. They should also be fragrant when crushed.

7. Be sure limbs are strong enough to support lights and ornaments. Limbs should also be well placed to give the tree a pleasing shape. Minor defects can often be turned toward a wall, however, and can lower the purchase price.

8. Ask the dealer if the tree was locally grown. Local trees are much more likely to be fresh because they are cut nearer Christmas and aren't shipped long distances.

Chose-and-cut trees are available from Christmas tree growers throughout Nebraska. For the locations of local growers, contact your local Extension office. Currently, locally-grown trees account for 10 to 15 percent of Nebraska's Christmas tree market. Scotch pine is the most common tree available from Nebraska growers. Other species grown in Nebraska include Austrian pine, ponderosa pine, white pine, Norway spruce, and concolor fir.

Buy a choose-and-cut tree the way you would a precut tree. Freshness and health are still the most important characteristics. The grower will usually have many trees marked for sale in various sizes. Some growers will cut the tree for you and others will expect you to cut your own.

Nebraska's *native Christmas trees* are eastern redcedar and ponderosa pine. Rocky Mountain juniper, that grows in western Nebraska, can also be used as a Christmas tree. These species are described below. If you cut your own native Christmas tree, be sure you get the landowner's permission. Trespassing is illegal, even to cut what may be an unwanted tree.

Potted or Balled Trees

Some people buy a potted or balled Christmas tree with roots intact in the hope of having a new landscape tree come spring. This is very difficult to do successfully, but your chances of success increase if the tree is treated right.

1. Buy a healthy tree from a reputable nursery or grower. Expect to pay a higher price than for a typical Christmas tree.

2. Keep the tree in a shaded area or a nonheated garage until it is brought inside.

3. Keep the soil in the ball or pot moist until well after it is transplanted after Christmas. A frozen ball need not be watered if the crown is shaded and protected.

4. Lift and carry the tree by the ball or pot, not the top.

5. Keep the tree in the house no longer than about one week.

6. Have the tree's planting hole dug before the soil freezes and keep the fill dirt thawed.

7. Remove packing and binding materials when planting the tree. Stake the tree for its first year, if possible.

Artificial Trees

Artificial trees must be used carefully. Electric lights should not be used on metal trees because of the danger of electric shock. Light these trees with off-the-tree spotlights. Plastic trees may be fire resistant but the fumes they give off when burned are toxic.

Species

As mentioned earlier, several species of Christmas trees are sold or produced in Nebraska. Some of the more common ones are described here.

- **Douglas-fir**, not a true fir, has 3/4- to 1-1/2-inch long needles that occur singly and are dark yellow-green or blue-green. Needle retention is good and most trees have good form, color, and density. This species is grown in Nebraska and brought in from other states.

- **Balsam fir**, a true fir, has flat 1/2- to 1-inch long needles that occur singly. The needles are shiny dark green on top and silvery white underneath. The attractive color, good fragrance, and good needle retention make it very popular, especially in the northeastern United States. This species is rarely grown in Nebraska and may be difficult to find.

- **Concolor fir**, another true fir, has flattened, blue-green needles about 1-1/2 inches long. It has nice color and form, but needles tend to drop indoors. Concolor fir is becoming very expensive because of its popularity as a landscape tree.

- **Austrian pine** has 4- to 6-inch long, dark green needles in bundles of 2. It has a more open form and stouter branches than most. These trees have good needle retention and are widely grown in Nebraska.

- **Ponderosa pine** looks very similar to Austrian pine, but needles are longer, in bundles of 2 and 3, and may be lighter colored. This species is native to western Nebraska.

- **Scotch pine**, or Scots pine, is the most popular Christmas tree in Nebraska. It is grown throughout Nebraska and many are brought from other areas to be sold here. Needles are in clusters of 2 and are 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 inches long. Winter color ranges from yellow-green to blue-green and needle retention is good. Form is more open than on non-pines, but sheared trees can be very dense.

- **Eastern white pine** has 3- to 5-inch long needles in bundles of 5. Needles have a feathery feel and a pleasing, blue-green color. Available to a limited extent in Nebraska.

- **Eastern redcedar** is not a true cedar, but is one of the junipers. This species grows wild throughout much of Nebraska. Its form and color are highly variable. Winter color of the trees tend to be dark purple-green and the odor can be quite strong. Foliage holds well, but twigs are thin and flexible and may not hold heavy ornaments well. This species is not usually sold as a Christmas tree but can often be obtained free with a land-owner's permission. Rocky Mountain juniper, grown in western Nebraska, looks similar, but stays blue-green in winter.

- **Blue spruce** and **Norway spruce** are both grown as Christmas trees in Nebraska. Spruce needles occur singly, are 1/2- to 1-inch long, and are stiffer than Douglas-fir. Blue spruce usually has light blue or gray needles and Norway spruce needles are darker green. Both have good form, a pleasing odor, and dense foliage, but lose their needles quickly in warm rooms. Both can be fairly expensive.

Cut Tree Care

Once you have chosen a fresh Christmas tree, do your best to keep it fresh. A tree can stay fresh and healthy for several weeks if it is well cared for.

1. When you get the tree home, cut about an inch off of the butt end to aid in water absorption. Get the cut end into a container of plain water quickly.

2. If the tree is not to be put up right away, store it in a protected, shady, unheated area. Cut the end and place the tree in a bucket of water.

3. When the tree is brought into the house, saw a slice of the butt again to insure water absorption.

4. Use a sturdy stand (see included design) with a large water reservoir so it won't dry out. A fresh tree can use 1 quart or more of water a day, so water daily. A tree is beginning to dry out if its water use slows or stops.

5. Keep the tree away from heat sources such as fireplaces, TV's, radiators, and air ducts. Never have open flames on or near a Christmas tree.

Decorating the Tree

Use only electric lights on your tree, never candles. Lights and cord should have the Underwriters Laboratories safety seal.

Do not get sentimental about Christmas lights. If insulation is cracked or sockets and plugs are loose or

broken, throw the lights away and get a new set. New lights are relatively inexpensive, use less electricity, and stay cooler than old lights. Many new light strings also have built in fuses. Follow directions that come with the lights to determine how many strings to put on one circuit. Be sure to turn off the tree lights when no one will be in the room for any length of time.

Untreated paper, cotton, or other flammable ornaments should not be used on Christmas trees. Treat these materials with a fire-retarding mixture made as follows:

Ingredients	*Amount*
Borax	7 ounces
Boric acid powder	3 ounces
Warm water	2 quarts

Mix these materials well. Immerse the materials to be treated or spray the solution on. Remember, this solution is a fire retardant, not a flame-proofing agent and is not effective in protecting a tree from fire.

Tree Disposal

Christmas trees can be useful even after they are taken down. Trees can be placed in the yard to add greenery and act as a bird haven until spring. Christmas trees can be used for firewood or chopped up and used as a mulch. Many communities have programs to gather trees after Christmas to be chipped for mulch or other uses.

Legislation

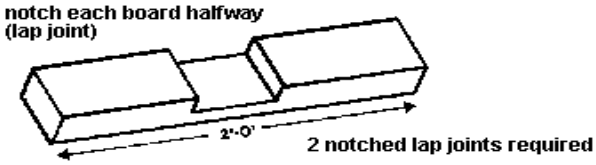
Christmas trees in places of assembly (100 or more persons), or where the public must pass through corridors and lobbies, are governed by regulations from the State Fire Marshal.

Live trees in places of assembly must be treated with flame retardant and the cut end kept covered with water; or may be left untreated if the following conditions are met.

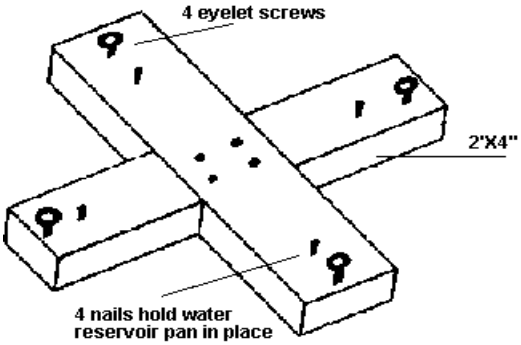
1. The height of the tree can not exceed 4 feet 6 inches and there must be at least 10 feet between trees.
2. A single tree not to exceed 8 feet in height is permitted within the sanctuary of a church or in a school building.
3. Trees can not be displayed longer than 15 days. Each tree must be tagged, stating the date of placement.
4. Water must cover the cut at all times.
5. Flame retardants must meet the requirements of the State Fire Marshal. Approved products are FIREKOTE, SEN-TREE, and OKAY NO FLAME. Fire equipment, paint, garden supply, and drug stores are likely distributors.

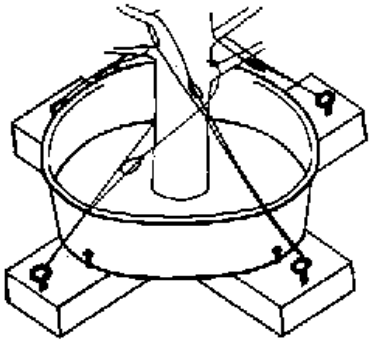
Christmas Tree Stand

This tree stand will accommodate very large or small trees. Its large water reservoir is made from a galvanized-steel, oil-change pan. The long cross-arms make it very stable and can be made of wood or welded steel.



Use nylon cords about 1/8" thick. Run cord from eyelet up and around the trunk about 1 1/2' to 2' up trunk. Wrap over branch or stub on opposite side it doesn't slip down.





Tighten cords with slip knots or tent guy-rope tighteners. Tree will stand upright and secure when all four cords are tightened.

File G866 under: FORESTRY
E-5, Miscellaneous
Paper version issued April 1988; 12,000 printed.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension educational programs abide with the non-discrimination policies of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.